

Gorbachev Faces 'Struggle' On Reforms, CIA's Gates Says

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Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev faces a "continuing intense struggle over the pace and scope" of his domestic reforms despite his apparent consolidation of power at recent meetings of the Communist Party's Central Committee and the Supreme Soviet, a high-ranking U.S. intelligence official predicted yesterday.

Central Intelligence Agency deputy director Robert M. Gates said Gorbachev confronts a growing array of domestic and economic problems and could be ousted if opponents sense the Communist Party is "losing control" in the Soviet Union or Eastern Europe.

Gates was not explicit, but his remark before a meeting sponsored by the American Association for the Advancement of Science was made at a time of popular unrest over economic and ethnic issues in Yugoslavia, Poland, Czechoslovakia, and in the Soviet republics of Armenia, Azerbaijan, Estonia and Latvia.

In a rare public analysis of the Soviet Union's political turmoil, Gates disclosed that the CIA has counted roughly 600 "popular disturbances" inside the Soviet Union since early 1987, attributing nearly half to "ethnic issues."

In the past year, he added, "major nationalist demonstrations" have occurred in nine of the 15 Soviet republics, creating "justifiable" concern among the nation's more conservative leaders "about the potential for instability . . . created by any relaxation of political controls."

Gates said Gorbachev's aggressive pursuit of *glasnost*, or openness, has enabled him to "highlight problems . . . in order to mobilize society behind his campaigns." But he added that in so doing, Gorbachev also "set loose [political] forces that will be immensely difficult and painful to leash, as we are seeing" in the ethnic disputes.

Gates said "it is by no means certain—I would even say it is doubtful—that Gorbachev can in the end rejuvenate the [Soviet] system." Gates has tended toward pessimism in past public comments on Gorbachev's leadership, but his assessment yesterday seemed particularly dour.

Gorbachev's economic reforms to date "do not go nearly far enough" to enable the Soviets to match Western technological progress, Gates said, and are instead "causing serious disruptions and turbulence."

Discontent is growing over the "huge and growing" gap between official "pronouncement and implementation" of the reforms, he added.

Gates attributed the problems to the Politburo's unwillingness, so far, "to let go of the reins governing the economy," and said

that "trying to reshape the . . . economic structure gradually while leaving key problems of price reform and the government monopoly over goods until [later] . . . is like [making] a phased change from driving on the right-hand side of the road to the left."

Gates, a 17-year CIA veteran and Soviet specialist, observed that Gorbachev "showed real political muscle" at the Supreme Soviet's Oct. 1 meeting by obtaining swift approval for appointment of several supporters and proteges to the government's ruling Politburo "while removing most of the remaining holdovers" appointed by one of his conservative predecessors, Leonid Brezhnev.

"Stalin would have been proud of the smoothly orchestrated 44-minute . . . session in which people were fired, retired, demoted, and promoted with no dissent or even discussion and 1,500 delegates voting as one," Gates said.

Three Politburo members were sacked, and Foreign Minister and Supreme Soviet President Andrei Gromyko was retired and replaced by a younger Gorbachev ally, ideologist Vadim Medvedev.

But Gates said the meeting, called on short notice, also signaled Gorbachev's "vulnerability and his frustration at the lack of progress, bureaucratic obstructionism and opposition in the party to his programs and policies, and of the desperate situation facing the Soviet Union."

Gates tossed cold water on the view that the new appointments secured Gorbachev's absolute power, noting that the Soviet leader can now "probably count on only three or four" out of the 12 voting Politburo members "as being totally his men, consistently supportive across the board."

Overall, "this set goes to Gorbachev," Gates said, but "the match is far from over."